

Alexandria Waterfront Committee Annual Waterfront Walk

June 24, 2009

Introduction

Waterfront Committee chair Susan Pettey welcomed the 40+ participants and noted that each stop along the walk would include discussion of the physical characteristics, history, and maintenance issues associated with the site. Ms. Pettey introduced City Archaeologist Pamela Cressey, who provided historical background for the sites along the walk.

Ms. Pettey also invited participants to complete the Committee's survey, which would be used to shape the Committee's agenda over the coming year.

One of the Waterfront Committee's principles for the waterfront is to provide continuous pedestrian access along the waterfront. She asked participants to consider that goal as they walked the waterfront. She noted that while participants would see the waterfront as it stands today, they should consider how the waterfront may change over 20 or more years due to rising sea levels or other impacts.

Department of Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Affairs (RPCA) staff advised participants to consider waterfront maintenance issues during the walk. RPCA is down to three staff members to maintain waterfront parks. To mitigate the impact of the recent budget cuts, the City is using Sherriff's Office work crews and volunteer clean-ups, and is developing an adopt-a-park program. There is strong interest by members of the public to host weddings and other events in City parks, and RPCA is developing a proposal to increase park rental fees for special events.

Windmill Hill Park

This land was once home to an actual windmill that supported farming in the area. There were water wells at each of the park's street ends, Gibbon and Wilkes streets. Historians are not certain why the windmills were located on this site.

Historically, the Alexandria waterfront was a transportation hub served by railroads and waterways. The Wilkes Street Tunnel, which served the railroads and ends in the park, is one example of the City's historic transportation infrastructure. Franklin Street was intentionally designed to be a wide street to facilitate waterfront access.

Much of today's waterfront in this location is infill. Plans to improve the park include replacement of eroding bulkheads, improving the dog run in Pomander Park (adjacent to Windmill Hill Park at 600 South Union Street), and 11 other improvements. The City's current approved Capital Improvement Program does not include funding for Windmill Hill Park bulkhead improvements until FY13 and FY14.

Roberdeau Park

This location, just south of Robinson Terminal South at the foot of Wolfe Street, is adjacent to Point Lumley. Today, the two Robinson Terminal warehouses are located on the locations of the two natural peninsulas that jutted furthest into the Potomac River, West Point and Point Lumley. Not coincidentally, the two Robinson Terminal sites also provide Alexandria's best access to the shipping channel. Between these points was Crescent Bay, which was filled early in Alexandria's history to provide more land for the growing City.

Alexandria merchants sold their goods at local stores, and marked their merchandise with characteristic brand marks. One way to incorporate the City's history into waterfront features is through artifacts, symbols (such as these brand markings), and other means, in addition to interpretive signs.

Alexandria was historically a technology behind some of its peer cities in the Mid-Atlantic region. For example, Alexandria was still building canals as Baltimore was building the nation's first railroad. This

shaped the City's growth patterns, including its waterfront development and the resulting waterfront of today.

One of the maintenance issues confronting Roberdeau Park is a failing seawall, which will require repair or replacement by the City.

Point Lumley Park

This park, at the foot of Duke Street, is owned by National Park Service and was acquired, along with the Roberdeau Park property, from the Robinson Terminal Warehouse Corporation (RTWC) as part of a settlement agreement with the U.S. Department of Interior over disputed title to RTWC properties. The park features an overlook of the Potomac River, and is frequently used for dog walking.

The area was once the site of Andrew Fleming's shipyard, and could provide a great view between the historic points of Crescent Bay. The blocks adjacent to Point Lumley Park were the location of numerous wharves, which served commercial uses. The warehouses along today's waterfront in the vicinity of The Strand are a legacy of this history.

The park is prone to flooding during high tide, which results in washouts, trash, and driftwood littering the park. Debris that collects in City parks is both man-made litter and natural debris. City staff will remove any man-made litter that makes landfall, but do not remove it from the water.

Robinson Terminal North and South are each comprised of numerous parcels, each of which has different limits on land use resulting from the settlement agreement and City land use and zoning policies. The Robinson Terminal South parcels have height restrictions ranging from 30 to 66 feet, with variable floor-area ratio (FAR) ceilings. None of the existing buildings at the site must be retained as none are considered historic.

The Strand

The City has used open space funds to purchase much of the waterfront along the 200 block of The Strand, with the exception of two lots used for parking by customers of Dandy Restaurant Cruises and Chadwick's Restaurant. The Strand is one area along the waterfront that could be used to host special events without disturbing residential neighborhoods. It was described by one participant as "major block along the waterfront that's waiting for something major to happen to it."

Today, only two blocks of The Strand remain. Historically, it ran five blocks from Wolfe to Queen streets and was the main street along the waterfront, providing a landside connection between all of the wharves. Restoring The Strand would improve connectivity along Alexandria's modern waterfront.

The 200 block of The Strand has some of the oldest buildings along the waterfront today. Formerly, alleyways ran between the buildings, perpendicular to the water, connecting the wharves to the street and providing merchants access to markets.

Buildings housing Chadwick's and the Potomac River Boat Company office today are built on historic foundations of waterfront warehouses that were fire damaged.

0 Prince Street, which most recently housed Full Metal Jacket, was built as The Beachcomber, a fine dining restaurant. Diners were seated on the top floor, which had a three-sided balcony with a commanding view of the water. The building was constructed on pilings in the Potomac River (i.e., in the District of Columbia) and was accessed by a thin pier over the water, thus enabling the restaurant to serve alcohol by the glass before Virginia repealed prohibition. Drinks were served at ornate wooden bars on both floors.

Between 200 blocks of The Strand and South Union Street, today's Interarms Warehouse was once the Waddles Mill, a corn mill dating to the 1850s. The building was described as "underused, ignored, and endangered," and it along with other buildings along the 100 and 200 blocks of South Union Street had significant development potential.

Waterfront Park

Sitting between King and Duke streets, this park provides one of the few open vistas of the water from an Old Town street end. A small pier extends into the river here. The park has been the site of special events, but was described as “underutilized,” however.

This was once the site of four wharves, and was used to access passenger steamers with daily trips to Norfolk. The wharves themselves were the site of commerce, including the Sign of the Orange Tree Tavern, which was sited on a wharf. The site is rich with African American history as the former site of a demarcation center where thousands of slaves were transported to southern states.

Maintenance issues in this area include regular tidal flooding along the 100 block of the Strand. On the day of the walk, in fact, spring tidal flooding closed the street for several hours, causing the walk to detour to South Union Street.

Potential opportunities for Waterfront Park include creating a greenbelt to its south, connecting it with recently-acquired City properties along The Strand.

Foot of King Street

The City owns the street ends to the Potomac River, including the foot of King Street. A recent case in U.S. District Court has partially settled the long-running title dispute between the Old Dominion Boat Club (ODBC) and the U.S. Department of Interior. The court ruled that the ODBC possesses clear title to the parcel on which its building is located (north of King Street), but will continue to consider title claims to the parcel south of King on which the ODBC’s parking lot is located.

The ODBC is Alexandria’s oldest remaining building standing directly on the water. The building in which Starbucks is located, at the corner of King and South Union, is the City’s oldest building associated with the water. ODBC is the oldest organization in the City in continuous operation on the waterfront. Its building once served as the ferry landing for trips across the river to Maryland, and there was once an arch on King Street that was associated with the ferry dock.

Marina

The Marina, behind the Torpedo Factory Art Center, was mostly developed in the 1980s.

RPCA staff described the Marina’s features. Much of the Marina’s decking is Trex, a high-density plastic material that was described as an improvement over wood, although it retains heat in the summer and can be icy in the winter and stains easily. The Marina’s benches are labor intensive, requiring maintenance often. There are no dumpsters at the Marina for trash collection. The City has received a grant from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to install security cameras at the Marina.

The Marina has been home to the National Harbor water taxi since April 2008. The present water taxi dock was established as a temporary location; the goal is to eventually move the dock to another location so that pedestrians are dispersed along the waterfront. National Harbor hosts events each weekend throughout the summer, which leads to water taxis full of visitors to Alexandria. New light fixtures were installed at the Marina in 2008 in anticipation of additional visitors.

An indoor waiting area was created for water taxi passengers under the Chart House Restaurant, but the only public restrooms are in the Torpedo Factory and the Food Pavilion (food court) building. There are many visitors in the Marina area between 6:00 and 11:00 p.m. nightly, after the Torpedo Factory (and its restrooms) have closed. Marina staff are often asked to provide tourism assistance to boaters and the general public.

The Marina has fixed piers, and the level of boats in relation to the piers varies by four-to-six feet due to normal tidal variance, but the range can be greater or less than that. Bathrooms and electrical facilities for boaters were described as inadequate. Waterlines serving the boat slips are made of PVC, and generally require \$7,000 to \$14,000 in annual repairs. The Marina has a dry-stem fire suppression

system, which can break when the waterlines are bumped by debris. Four-to-six E Pier docks are presently closed due to piling damage.

There are two marinas at National Harbor which provide modern facilities to serve boats over 30 feet in length. A lot of other marinas in the region have recently been improved in response to National Harbor. As a result, the Alexandria Marina has a dwindling wait list and fewer transient boaters docking.

The Fire Department's fireboat is moored at the Marina, and the only vehicular access to the pier is via Thompson's Alley, which is frequently blocked for deliveries. The fireboat was described as essential to have at the Marina given the high flammability of boats. The Fire Department would like to relocate its boat to 0 Prince Street, which is closer to its nearest fire station.

Marina waterways are dredged on average every seven years, or approximately two years following any tropical storms or hurricanes. The cost of dredging is a capital cost borne by the City. The Marina was last dredged during the winter of 2008.

The waterfront forms the boundary between Virginia, the District of Columbia, and Maryland, and there are often jurisdictional issues surrounding activity on the water.

Presently, there are no facilities for general public to use canoes or kayaks along the waterfront. Since larger boats (such as those using the Marina) cannot easily see canoes or kayaks, it was suggested that facilities for these boats be north of Robinson Terminal North or south of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge.

Other anchors at the Marina include the Torpedo Factory Art Center, the Food Pavilion, and the Charthouse. The Torpedo Factory currently receives 500,000 visitors per year, but its goal is to attract more than one million annually. The Food Pavilion and Charthouse have long-term leases with the City, but there's potential to renegotiate. It was noted that presently there are limited facilities to eat outdoors near the Food Pavilion.

Founders Park

This park, between Cameron and Oronoco Streets, provides one of the most open vistas of the waterfront in the City. Since it's surrounded by residences, however, it is largely a passive park. It is occasionally used for special events. It has been adopted by the Founders Park Community Association.

The area was once the site of Fish Town, an encampment that sprang up overnight when the shad were running in the river. The property that is Founders Park today was originally proposed for high-rise apartments. Residents fought this proposal and sought instead to use what had been vacant industrial land as a park.

Pilings with aluminum interpretive signs remain from 1982. These signs had been placed throughout the waterfront. Few of these signs remain, and most are illegible.

There are several seawall failures along the waterfront, the worst of which is near the Seaport Center in Founders Park. Installation of a breakwater may reduce battering of the seawalls.

In the northeast corner of Founders Park (at the foot of Oronoco Street) a cordon line collects creosote outfall into the river from polluted land under the former site of a manufactured gas plant at the corner of Oronoco and Lee streets. The pollution drains via the path of least resistance, which is the sewage outfall at this location. The boom was installed to capture sludge and sediment and reduce pollution to the Potomac River. A pedestrian overlook here has been closed due to the contamination.

Robinson Terminal North

Robinson Terminal North is a brownfield site. Water drainage through this former site of coal storage piles leads to arsenic-contaminated water.

RTWC has floated plans to develop its North site. It would feature a park along the water, with possible development on the site's centermost parcels. The real estate market has recently shifted, however, but this may still be the first of the significant waterfront parcels to see re-development. The North site has a 50 foot height limit and floor-area ratio (FAR) limit of 2.5 to 3.0, depending on the parcel.

The RTWC proposal is to develop the North Terminal site before the South. RTWC would sell the property to a developer; it would not develop the parcel itself. The company's long-term plan is to continue to use the South Terminal, where it could possibly resume water shipments in the future.

If the North Terminal were redeveloped, Alexandria would need to consider how to provide fueling options for commercial boats. Currently, commercial vessels fuel near Robinson Terminal North. In addition, commercial vessels working along the docks require places to store equipment and materials, if the waterfront is to remain a working waterfront yet be kept tidy.